

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Letter To The Editor | What Women Do

Opinion / **Published On December 18, 2017 12:59 PM /**

Staff **December 18, 2017**



Dear Editor,

I often wonder how do they do it? Women are the backbone and nucleus of every family, the mothers, the ones who take care of everything. As a child, I watched my mother, and now, as an adult I see my wife perform daily miracles making a home for our family. That's what women do-- build families. That's why I am absolutely dismayed that we have done so little to address the challenges faced by single mothers who often shoulder the major weight of primary caregiving alone. We must take action.

A woman may become a single mother due to the death of the other parent, divorce or other circumstance. According to the most recently reported Virgin Islands data (2013),

single females headed 53% of all V.I. families with children compared to the U.S. rate of 20% of all families headed by single females. Even more disturbing is the rate of poverty among our children in single female headed families which rose from 39% to 43.7% in just one year. Poverty is the single greatest threat to children's well-being. (U.S.V.I. KIDS COUNT Data Book 2015, Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands).

This disheartening situation is no secret. It has been exposed for years by local media and the Kids Count reports. While the data tells us a huge story about the quality of life for mothers and their children, it has commanded relatively little attention or response by government leaders. What we avoid discussing publicly is that the most significant statistic that powers these reports is the amount of single headed female households in the territory.

Regrettably, single mothers who work to support a family have become our working poor. They often speak about the difficulties of balancing schedules, finances and family care especially with a government job that pays \$30,000 or less. They might not qualify for services offered to mothers who are unemployed, but have payroll deductions for retirement, family health insurance and taxes. Where does that leave them to pay bills, or have disposable cash? Single mothers across the territory worry every day about meeting basic needs while trying to hold down a job, sometimes two.

I travelled our islands after the hurricanes and am now even more acutely aware of the mothers who must bring their children on the job to make it. Some of these children color in corners or are distracted by a cell phone, but they are present. The instability of the public schools and pre-school programs with shrinking budgets only exacerbate the problem.

Government and community leaders, now is the time for you to stand up and employ strategies to improve this situation. When we discuss our poverty problem, it is primarily a discussion about women and children. We have programs that feed people fish but not enough that teach them to fish. Since the national War on Poverty began in 1964, we have done well in ensuring that we can sustain poverty, now is the right time to create ladders to the middle class.

The ladder is created by matching programs and funding to ensure stronger mothers and thus stronger families. Currently, there is no coordinated effort to guarantee self-sufficiency. The ideal model would permit participants to take advantage of training and internships that would not immediately impact on their level of government assistance like childcare and SNAP. This model would also address the many challenges for working mothers which sometime make it seem pointless to even try to work. President Barack Obama understood this when his administration created legislation that allowed people hard hit by the recession to set up their businesses, and still collect unemployment insurance while creating opportunities.

The truth is that reinvesting in our single mothers and others works for the entire community. It broadens the tax base, educates the people, makes health care more accessible, encourages entrepreneurship, promotes home ownership, and reduces crime in our neighborhoods. The more people with a piece of the pie, the more likely it will be protected.

This policy position stems from the pretext that the average individual wants to work and provide for family. Take a look on our roads today--it is obvious that people want to work. Mostly every able-bodied individual is out there trying to make a FEMA dollar. Now is the time to set policies and programs that make careers, not just jobs, the priority.

Positive results will happen to strengthen our people and their families, and grow our economy when we tackle our problems at their root.

Albert Bryan, Jr. Former V.I. commissioner of Labor, currently 2018 gubernatorial candidate

© Viconsortium 2026